

The Builder.

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OUR Architects! Or perhaps we should be nearer right if we said, stupid architects! for the indignities to which they are now constantly subjected, have been mainly led to by their own proceedings. The workhouse plot at Birmingham thickens. Private interest fighting against private interest led to disclosures at a meeting of the guardians, on the 6th, which otherwise, probably, would not have come out. The opposition to the selection made by the Committee appears, on the part of some of the guardians, to be no evidence of a desire to do justice to all the competitors, and discharge their duties conscientiously, but would seem to proceed simply from a desire to serve their own particular friend. Thus one of the committee stated at the meeting, that the sole reason why another member of the Board opposed plan No. 1, was, that his son was in the office of the architects of No. 2. It is to be hoped, however, that a majority of independent men will be found to look at the question in its proper light, and act irrespectively of private feelings and connections, so as to remove, if possible, the stigma which has been cast upon their body.

It would seem that the fraud practised on the stranger-architects, who responded to their invitation, was systematic, and intended from the beginning. One of our correspondents shows that, even in the matter of time, the leaning to their local friends was evident. He says, as to depositing the plans,—“It was stated in the instructions that all plans must be sent in on or before the 1st of January, at twelve o'clock; and further, that all plans received after that time would not be looked at, but put on one side till applied for by their respective owners. Now this, one of the most important conditions (for a day is of infinite value in finishing such elaborate drawings as they must necessarily be for a building of this magnitude), was violated, and altogether set on one side by keeping the office open till eleven P.M.; and no notice of this was given to the competitors (excepting, of course, the Birmingham men, all of whom were fully aware of it), unless something like the following, which I received the day after my plans were deposited:—“Requiring some explanation respecting the site, I wrote to the person appointed to furnish architects with particulars: I received an answer on the 2nd, with the necessary information, and also informing me of the extension of time to eleven P.M. I am sure no non-resident availed himself of this desirable extension,—for, upon depositing my plans, which I did some time before 12 on the 1st, I was told they were the forty-seventh. The above answer to my letter, coming on the 2nd of January, was certainly an Irishism, but whether wittingly or not I cannot say.”

* The same writer, who forwards his name, says,—“One thing more I would allude to, viz., the manner in which the committee came in possession of the names of the competitors. The instructions stated that each design was to be accompanied by a sealed letter, containing estimate, &c. Now I understood from this, and I am sure many others did the same, that the designs were to be sent in under a motto; but it appears that the Birmingham men, fearful lest their friends in committee should mistake, sent in their plans with their names written in full. This will account for the committee so easily selecting their friends.”

Even the strict prohibition from canvassing the guardians, which was published, must have been for the purpose of deterring the strangers only from endeavouring to make interest, for the canvassing on the part of the local architects, and of members of the Board for them, is not denied.

This view of the matter was fully borne out by one of the speakers at the meeting alluded to (Mr. Allday), who pointed out, at considerable length, the injustice which had been done to architects at a distance from Birmingham. “Those architects,” he said, “were called on to prepare and send in plans; they were led to believe that there was no limitation as to the expense of their buildings, while it was a fact that the Birmingham architects well knew that it was an understanding in the committee that the estimate should not exceed 30,000*l*. Was that fair? And yet he could shew that it was not an accidental thing; that the omission of such a fact was intentional. It was moved in the committee that the printed instructions should set forth that the estimate should not exceed 30,000*l*., but that motion could not be entertained. That was not doing justice to architects at a distance. If they had known this fact, as the local architects knew it to be a fact, did any one think that the architects in London and other places would have sent in plans varying in cost from 30,000*l*. to 30,000*l*.? He could state it to be a fact, that the majority of the plans sent in were estimated at more than 30,000*l*., and some of them, of the most perfect and beautiful description, were rejected because they did not come within that sum. He left that fact before them; and, in his opinion, it gave ground for the charges made in the *Birmingham Journal* and *The Builder*, that the majority of the architects had not had fair play.”

“Comment,” says the *Journal*, with reference to this striking new feature in the case, “would spoil the effect of this revelation.” We had formed and expressed a very strong opinion on the *mala fides* of the proceedings, but no such deliberate trick as the above entered into our imagination. The knowledge of it should be sufficiently condemnatory of the whole transactions of the Committee from first to last; for it is quite evident that the omission was designed to lead competitors into error.”

After much discussion, Mr. Edmonds, one of the guardians, moved—“That with a view to obtain further information, and more certainly limiting the cost of the new workhouse within the reasonable expectations of the ratepayers, the report be referred back to the Committee, who for that purpose shall be authorised to procure the written opinions of architects or builders of reputation, as to the relative merits of such of the plans as are not excluded from competition by the printed instructions, together with the grounds on which such opinions are based; that on the receipt of the opinions so obtained, the committee proceed to report to this Board their opinion of the plan which ought to be ultimately selected; and that the opinions of the architects and builders be published in our local newspapers, for the information of the ratepayers.” This was discussed at considerable length, and ultimately the meeting was adjourned to Tuesday, the 13th, but what was then done we do not yet know.

It appears that no less than 264 architects applied for copies of the printed instructions to competitors.

According to the report of the committee the estimated cost of the plan recommended is

27,700*l*., or at the rate of 16*l*. 15*s*. per head for 1,664 inmates. The accommodation is for 250 male, and 351 female adults; for 227 boys, 289 girls, and 143 infants. In the infirmary, provision is made for 159 males and 159 females. There is also accommodation for 26 male, and 26 female tramps, and for 22 married aged couples. There is a chapel, two separate dining halls, three separate school-rooms, with two class rooms attached to each. The style was said by the committee to be *Italian*, but this some of the speakers denied, saying it was *Elizabethan*, and that this assertion was itself sufficient to prove the inefficiency of the tribunal by whom the plans had been judged. Alas! poor architects and poor architecture!

But abuse is thrown away, and pity is thrown away. See what the committee for restoring the Lewes Free Grammar School have the impudence to make public. We were about to say the *courage* to make public, but it needs no courage. Architects have lost all proper spirit and self-esteem. The advertisement is directed—“To the Architects and Builders of Sussex,” and stands thus,—“The architects and builders of Sussex are invited to furnish plans and estimates for rebuilding the Lewes Free Grammar School at an expense not to exceed 2,000*l*., to be prepared according to instructions from a sub-committee already organized for that purpose, which instructions may be had on application at the office of Messrs. ‘Gull and Co.’ to whom such plans and estimates are requested to be delivered on or before the 27th of February next. The architect or builder whose plan and estimate shall be finally adopted, will be entitled to a remuneration not exceeding ten pounds ten shillings, at the discretion of the committee.”

A remuneration! mark that, ye rising Wykehams and little Wren’s “Remuneration” means, according to the dictionary, reward, requital, recompense, but what does it mean according to these gentlemen of Sussex, on whose “discretion” architects are to depend? Why, it means, the remote chance of getting, for the work done, not one-fifth of what ought to be received for it without any risk at all. It marks the *status* the profession enjoys. It shows the contempt in which architects are held. A thing is worth what it will fetch, they say. If your talent is to

* Our correspondent is silent from a desire on the general subject of competition, says,—“What in the name of all that is extraordinary is the real and unostentatious meaning of the word ‘competition’? In the present day it seems to have undergone a complete change, and is now only to be interpreted by acts of chicanery and dissimulation, each in their perils’ way, striving to outdo the other in the word ‘chicanery.’ From the numerous iniquitous cases, where this has been done, which you have from time to time so justly exposed and commented on, more especially from the recent disclosures in the Rochester affair, the wonder is that any architect can be fool enough to waste his time on such utterly fruitless labour, as joining in one of these unprofitable schemes. For my own part, experience has taught me to distrust altogether, having frequently noticed the attractive bait held out in the advertisements, and, as a matter of course, as frequently been ‘taken in.’ With respect to the competition for Kingston Church, which appeared in your paper some months ago, I could not but be surprised that it should be creditable to the committee of that affair, but I never saw more than that it is fully entitled to a high rank under the head ‘job.’ With a view to lessen the evil, I propose to form a society, to be called the ‘Anti-competition or Jobbing Society,’ each member of which should be required to take an oath, that he will never send in for a competition unless he have a written statement from the parties advertising, that he is to have the job, no matter who else or how many are applied to for drawings; that he shall read this statement before a general meeting of the members, in order that they may communicate the same to their friends, and thus relieve them from the necessity of making fools of themselves by wasting their time and talents on useless pursuits. Some such movement made by the rising generation might, I think, be productive of much good, and open the eyes of the juvenile members of the architectural profession a little wider than they are wont to be.” And another correspondent says,—“Our friends, in *Wreck*, often take a leaf from your book; might I suggest for once that we should follow their example, and so they criticize the use and abuse of the Queen’s English in the advertisement to the world at large, do you, Mr. Weston five minutes of your editorial time in submitting to the rules of Lindley Murray, of rearward memory, and bestow us issued by the worthy of Birmingham for this workhouse? For our own parts, however, we will not question their grammar, if they will but mind their manners.”